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THE ETCHINGS OF PIRANESI

By
RUSSELL STURGIS

NEW YORK
FREDERICK KEPPEL & CO.

1900

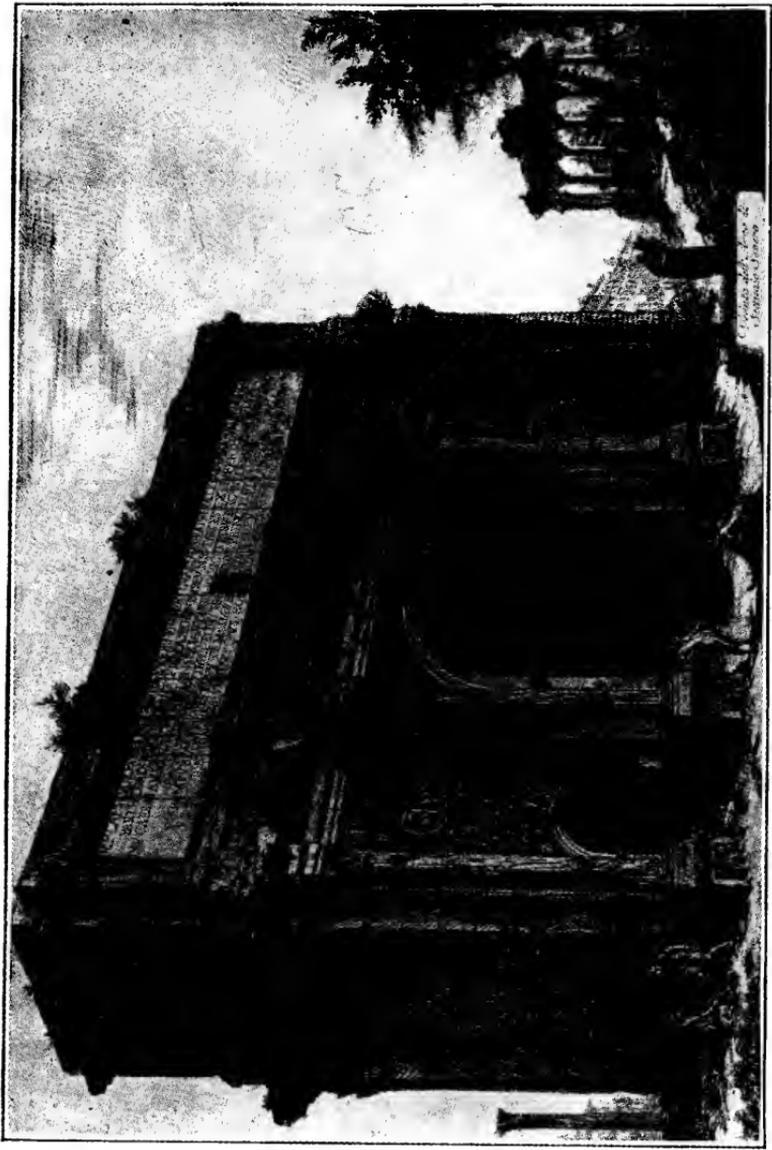
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ARCH OF SEPTIMIUS SEVERUS

THE ETCHINGS OF
PIRANESI

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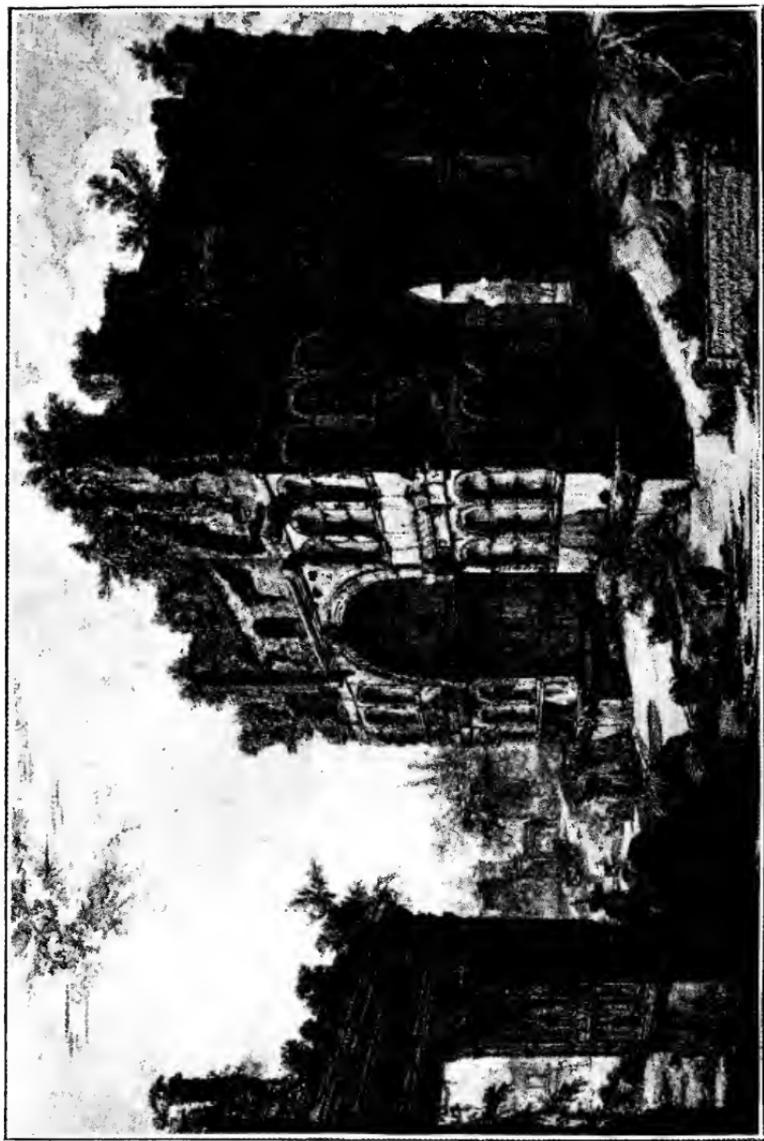


BATHS OF DIOCLETIAN

THE ETCHINGS OF PIRANESI

GIAMBATTISTA PIRANESI was born at Venice in 1720, and died at Rome in 1778. His tomb is in the Church of St. Mary on the Aventine, which once belonged to the Priory of the Knights of St. John. There is there a statue of some merit which commemorates him, and the fact that he, as architect, restored and decorated that Church ten years or more before his death. He also restored the Church of Santa Maria del Popolo, which everybody visits in Rome on account of its superb monuments of the Renaissance; and his work as architect in the interior of this Church, at least, is not without some merit in a conventional and academical way. This, however, is of little account. Piranesi is known now in one way only, and in that way is not half so well known as he should be. His big etchings of architectural subjects are too big for collectors to enjoy heartily. Your true collector is a man of minute and delicate little refinements and subtle distinctions in his tastes and in his ways, and Piranesi's works are big and bold. Moreover, nobody's house is large enough, at least in the cities, to contain Piranesi's work with any satisfaction or com-

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fort. The prints from his large etchings bind up in twenty-four folio volumes, more or less, according to the fancies of the owner; or if they are kept in portfolios, they demand in like manner a great deal of room and much energy on the part of the would-be student. It is true that a hundred plates selected out of the mass contain all that is best in his work, and that twice as many would furnish the student with all that he need study; but that is not the collector's way of going to work. The collector wants all. This is the only way of accounting for the comparative neglect of this great master. It is not, the present writer believes, because he himself is an enthusiastic student of architecture that Piranesi's work seems attractive. The student of architecture does not generally care for the painter's or the etcher's portrayal of buildings. From Piranesi to Pennell, the artist who occupies himself with architecture as a subject is rather an annoyance than a pleasure to one who loves architecture for its own sake. The thing to look for in Piranesi is not so much architecture (there is something to say of that side of him, too) as fine and masterly engraving of original subject. He was one of the last of the great painter-etchers and painter-engravers of old times, and by no means the least of them. It may be extravagant to say, as some



TEMPLE OF JANUS



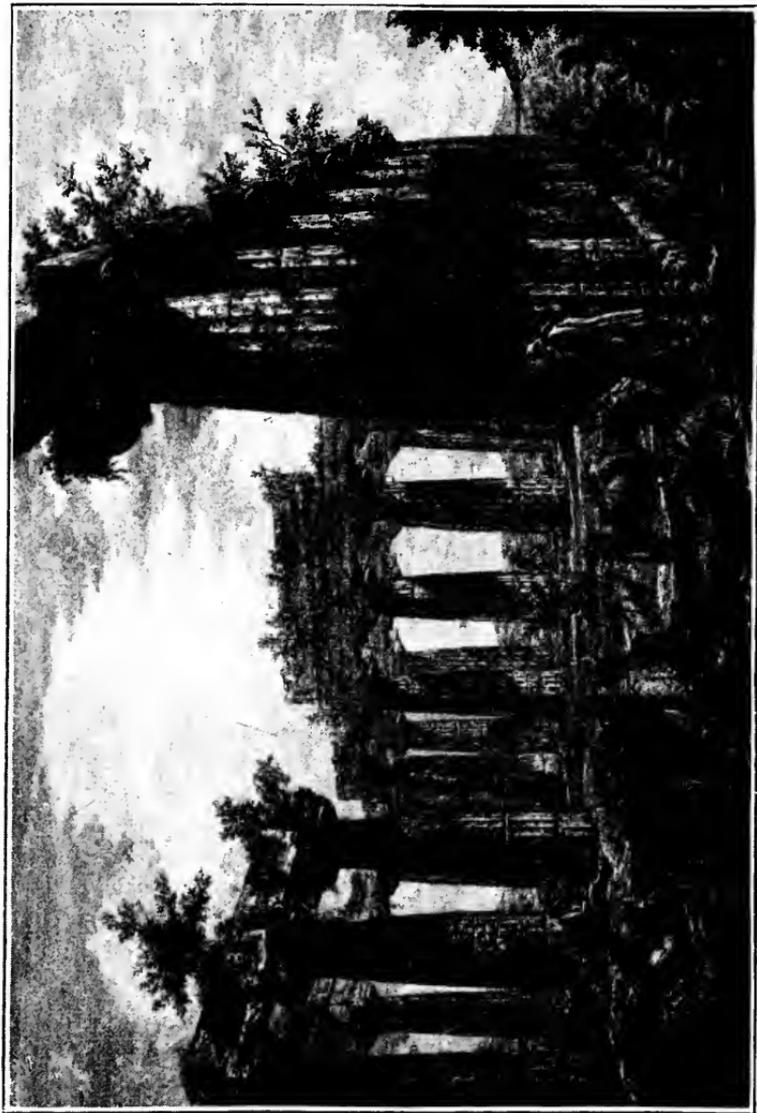
THE ETCHINGS OF PIRANESI

have said, that his work would be gathered as eagerly as Rembrandt's if it were not so bulky; but it is not extravagant to say that no man has seen all that the engraver's art is capable of until he has seen and studied nearly everything that Piranesi has left.

The fault of his work as an engraver is in the extreme contrasts of dark and light. He had a natural tendency toward blackness. There can be no mistake about that. One has only to look at the Pæstum prints to be certain of that—the three which illustrate the building called by the artist, and generally, "Temple of Neptune," and the one called here "Temple of Juno," now more commonly "Temple of Vesta" or "Temple of Ceres." He loved to work his blacks down to a very complete blackness; and although he knew as well as any man how to make a translucent shadow,—a shadow within which minute details could still be seen,—he often disregarded this important element in architectural rendering. It is odd to see him struggling, as in the view of the Tivoli Villa (which he has lettered by a slip of the graver "Villa Estnse"), with his twofold instinct. He longs to make everything clear black and white; and yet the outdoor effect is not thus to be attained. In the magnificent view of the "Piazza e Basilica di S. Pietro," magnificent in spite of a dozen errors in

THE ETCHINGS OF PIRANESI

drawing, the black low notes in the foreground are gorgeous coaches of cardinals, contrasting with groups of ragged beggars, and the architecture is in a higher key. On the other hand, in the extraordinary plate of the Villa Panfili—that in which the figures 1 and 2 refer to the Villa Corsini, and the figure 3 to the Villa Ferroni—it is odd to see him hesitating between his desire to get strong blacks in contrast with pure whites, and his further and equally strong desire to express the delicacies of architecture. The print of this plate, of which the first state is in Mr. Keppel's collection, is a superb print, one that every man who loves landscape and architecture taken together, or fine engraving of a conventional sort, should study carefully. So the fine interior of the Basilica of S. Giovanni Laterano is a really surprising achievement, when the difficulties of rendering the architectural effects of a large and elaborate interior like this are considered. And here, certainly, the blacks can hardly be said to be overcharged. There is, indeed, in the great piers nearest the eye a very bold contrast of sunlighted edges and deeply shaded sides; but it seems to be needed for the general effect, according to the favorite old saying of the necessity of a *repoussoir*. An equally skilful artist who did not like black and white in direct contrast quite as well as Piranesi



TEMPLE OF NEPTUNE AT PÆSTUM

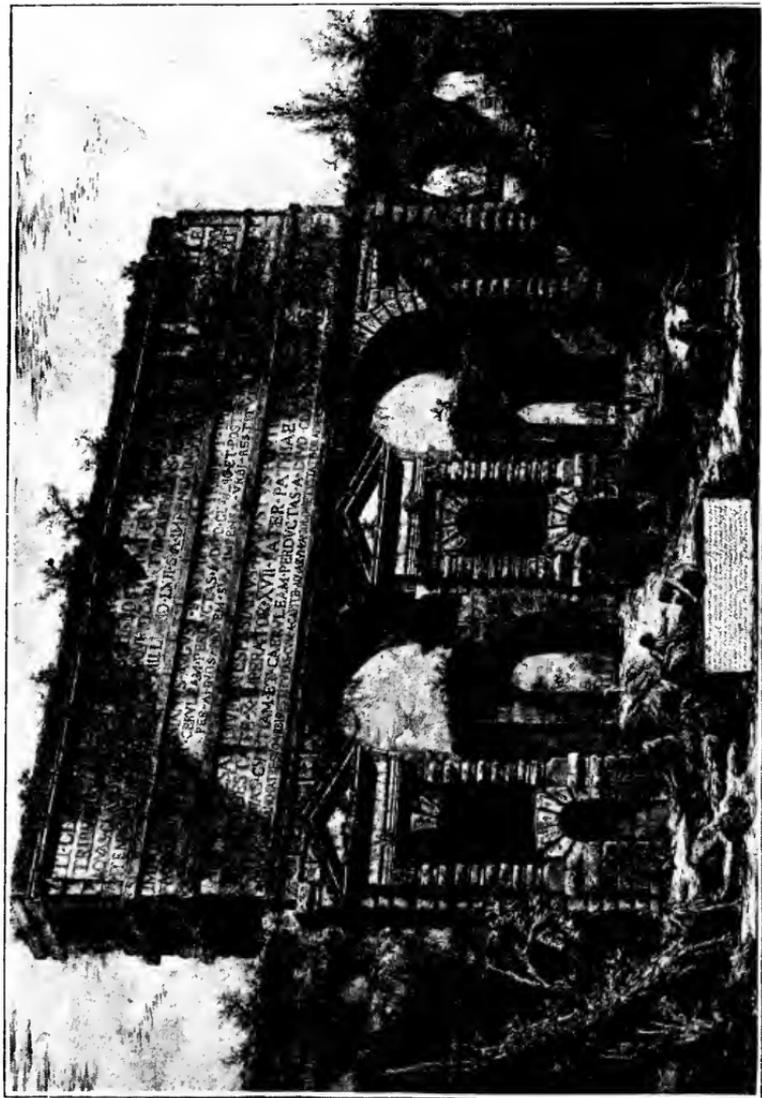
THE ETCHINGS OF PIRANESI might, perhaps, have made a solid-looking and impressive print with more delicate gradations; but that is a supposition only. It is not easy to turn to a print that proves the truth of this assumption. The interior view of St. Peter's is less fine in detail. The ornamentation of the vaulting is seen, even in the fine first state, to be uncertain and vague, as if the artist did not himself know what it was that he had to represent. It is rendered with a truly "niggling" touch, which surprises one at the hands of this practised master. And yet even in this print the effect of the interior, as a piece of massive building massively treated, is fine. Once again what has been said must be modified. The perspective is certainly incorrect; and the span of the great arches to left and right is shown here as impossibly great. As delightful as anything in the collection is the view of that broad and sunny street in Rome (think of a broad and sunny street in the Rome of the eighteenth century!), which print has so long a title that it seems better to accept the penciled title given it by Mr. Keppel on its margin—"The French Academy at Rome." There is the true rendering of external architecture! It is sunny and solid, vast and yet delicate; there is no excess of blackness here, and yet the effect of sunshine has been seized. If the

THE ETCHINGS OF PIRANESI

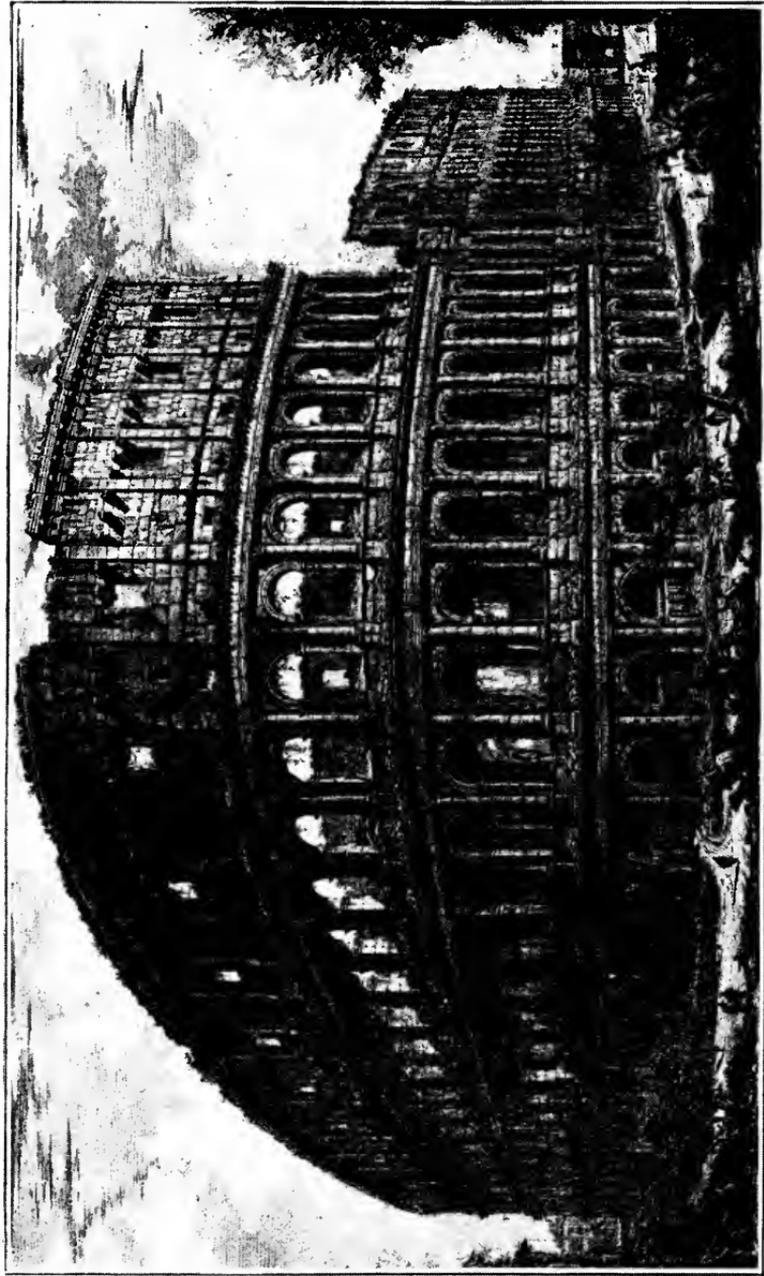
photographic process print, the heliogravure, the heliotype, the Lichtdruck, and the photogravure had not come to reconstitute the whole business of rendering architecture, one might point to this plate and bid the engraver of the present day try to imitate its merits. There are not more than two or three engravers of the present day other than the etchers of free-hand and non-academic individuality; but if line-engraving ever is restored to favor as an independent art, or if that curious mixture of the etched line and the burin line which Piranesi loved and the great Méryon did not despise should ever again be taken up seriously, then this print should be hung in every atelier.

The student should observe that he must look only at early impressions, on thick Italian paper, made by hand a hundred years or more ago, if he wants to understand Piranesi. The sets in modern libraries are not very apt to be fine or to contain any fine impressions at all. The plates still exist, and are still used to print from, with sad results.

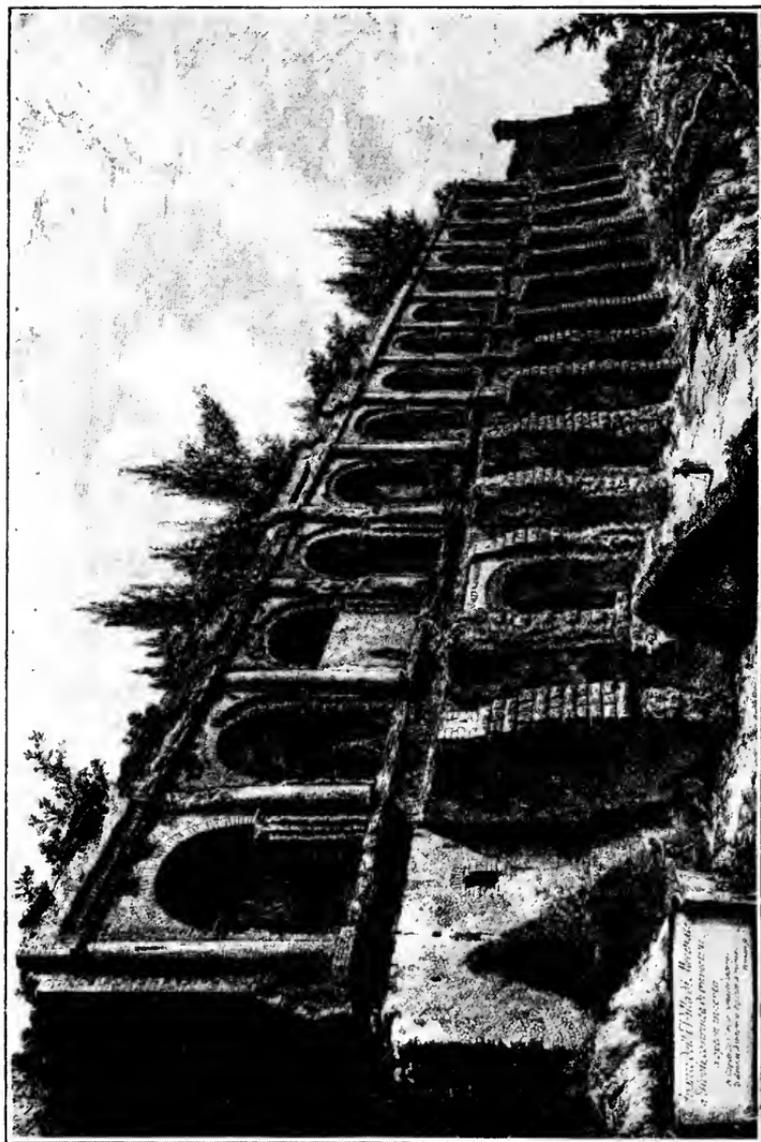
As regards the architecture itself and the interest which the student may and ought to take in Piranesi's architectural studies, it must never be forgotten that he gave us the aspect of many a fine old building in its much more perfect condition, before the havoc



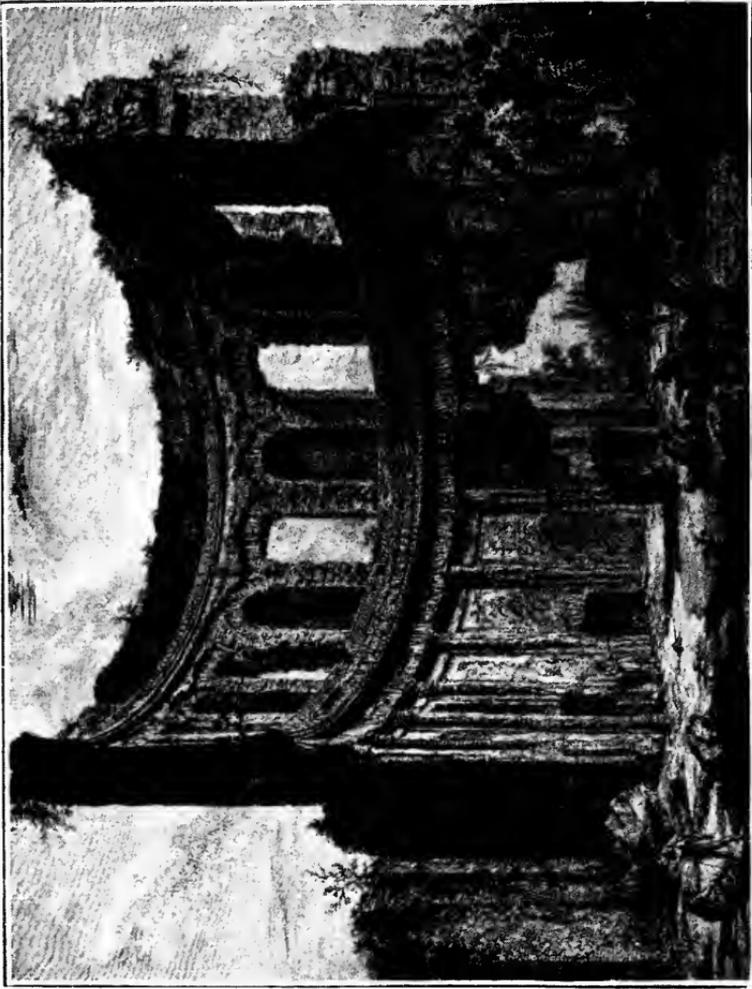
ARCH OF VESPASIAN



EXTERIOR OF THE COLISEUM



VILLA OF MÆCENAS



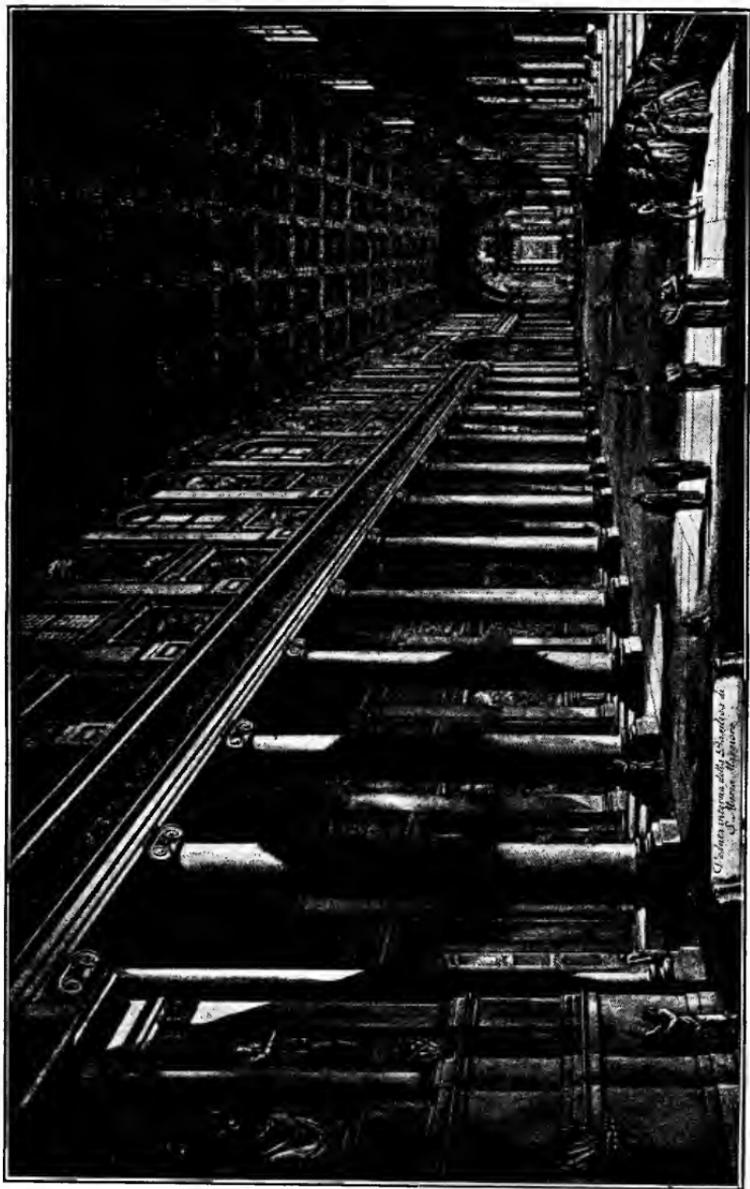
TEMPLE OF APOLLO

THE ETCHINGS OF PIRANESI

wrought by one more century of popes and princes or of ignorant peasants, and also before the clearing out and cleaning up of the present archæological epoch. Now the archæological work done during the last forty years has been, on the whole, advantageous from every point of view. No one can doubt that seriously; but there has also been—what was, perhaps, inevitable—a certain staying up and piecing out of old work by new; and this, although detected easily enough by him who examines the building itself, may deceive in any, even the best, pictorial representation. There is, of course, nothing of this in the Piranesi prints; and it is well to know in what condition these ruined monuments of antiquity were before the archæologists took hold of them. Modern archæology is, or should be, doubting and questioning, and likes not to accept things as true on the mere authority of long-continued assumption. It is good to learn, as one may learn from these prints, that the Arch of Titus was until lately built into a continuous wall, and, on the Forum side at least, without its entablature, its free columns, and its architectural setting out. The print which shows this Arch in connection with the Villa Farnese, gives the other side—the side further from the Forum, which had been left in somewhat better condition. But that view

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also shows the Arch in a very different state from its present rearranged and more orderly aspect. This restored and rejuvenated appearance it was not to put on until seventy years after Piranesi's death. It is good to learn how the Temple of Cori looked in the year 1750 or thereabouts. The Castel Sant' Angelo, with its additions, its rooms built for popes escaping in terror from the Vatican and making a palace and fortress out of the old tomb of Hadrian, still keeps, indeed, some of its earlier aspects; but the print of it shown in this collection, covered all over with letters of reference, gives, in spite of these letters, in spite of the absurdly false perspective of the Round Tower, an image which one is glad to see preserved, of the old building of the popes. It is well to have the Piranesi view of the Pantheon, now that the belfries have been taken away and the abortive secondary pediment has also disappeared, and the building is put, as nearly as modern archæologists can do it, back into its original form. Here again the drawing of the Round Tower is dreadfully "out." It seems odd that so accomplished a draftsman should never have learned the true secret of the "perspective ellipse"; but, indeed, that same "ellipse" bothers modern draftsmen too. The view of the Campo Vaccino may stir the memories of those who knew Rome



INTERIOR OF SANTA MARIA MAGGIORE

THE ETCHINGS OF PIRANESI

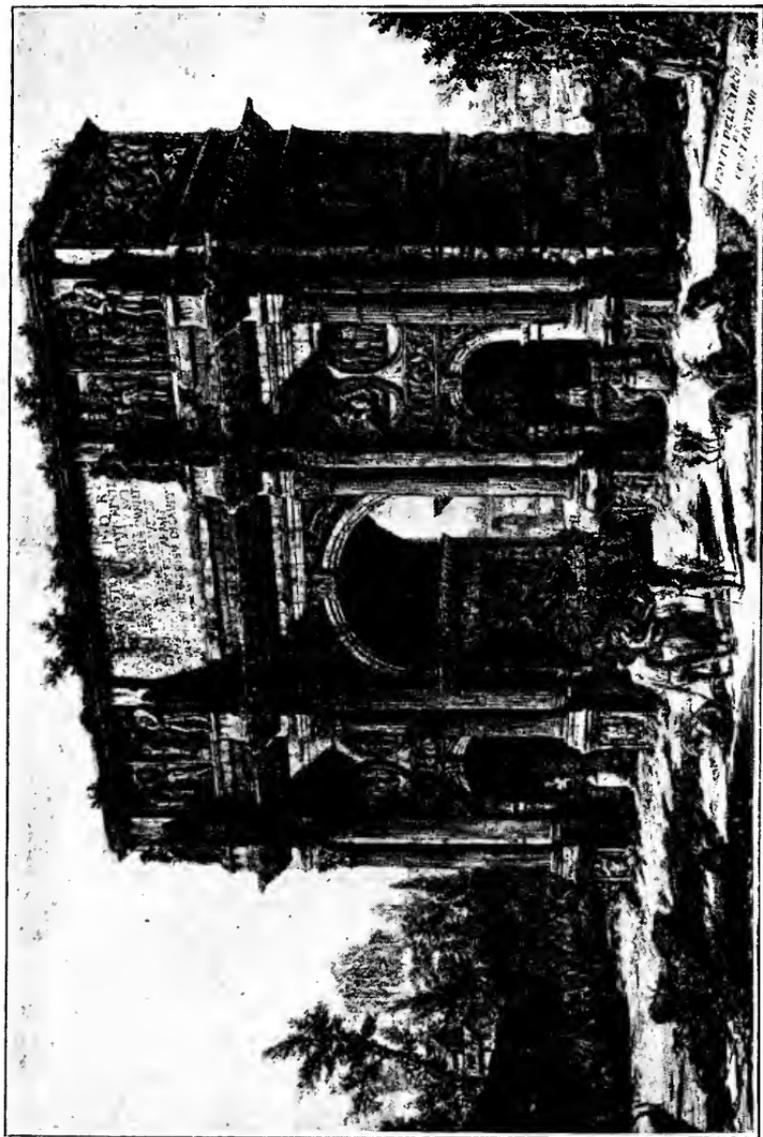
forty years ago; and it is worth any one's while to muse over that for a moment, and reflect that under the peaceful grass and trees of this "cow-field" lay the Roman Forum waiting to be exhumed. The two prints of the Antonine and the Trajan Columns are admirable renderings of richly adorned architecture, and these are artistic triumphs as well, models of what is fine in engraving. Finally, the Arch of Trajan at Benevento is really a magnificent piece of architectural drawing and engraving, and all our photographs should be compared with it for a right understanding of the sculpture. As a general thing, one hates to have a mind come between the original artist and himself. What the second-century sculptor meant to say the nineteenth-century student should be allowed to read without the interposition of Piranesi or any one else, and that is why photographs are good; but in this case Piranesi's drawing does serve as a valuable comment and illustrated lecture, which any one can afford to listen to, on the sculptures of the Arch.

This exhibition includes a portrait print in which Giuseppe Cades, the fresco-painter, has engraved the medallion of Piranesi, while the architectural draftsman himself has put in all the shattered fragments of Roman art that lie about, including admirable sculp-

THE ETCHINGS OF PIRANESI

tured friezes and capitals and pieces of the great plan of the Capitol engraved on marble slabs.

As the above paper is to be reprinted (January, 1900), it seems well to add to it a few remarks upon the Piranesi etchings of the Pæstum temples. Messrs. F. Keppel & Co. have added to their collection some brilliant proofs of these important engravings. From these prints it appears that in no part of his large *répertoire* was Piranesi more devotedly a pupil of the school of deep and black shadows than in this special episode. It seems odd that the buff and gray columns and entablatures of weather-worn tufa, gilded and glorified by the south Italian sun, should have enabled any artist of insight and of expressional power to have made out of them such an absolute study of jetty blackness and vivid white. That, however, is the daily mystery of fine art; so little does it concern itself with the facts of nature—so powerfully does it convey the artistic truth which the artist conceived! We can say that without in any way admitting that Piranesi's proof was as valuable—as important, as interesting, as attractive—as would have been an artistic verity which came nearer to the actual fact. Nature is wiser than artists, sometimes; and even



ARCH OF CONSTANTINE

THE ETCHINGS OF PIRANESI

the boldest preacher of the doctrine of "art for art's sake" will not deny that assertion.

As to the Pæstum temples themselves, it is curious to note that in the middle of the eighteenth century they were as ruinous as now, with hardly a stone in its place, which has since fallen. This fact illustrates the truth, which has been stated many times, but which the reading public generally refuse to accept,—the truth that time has little to do with the destruction of a solid building. It is not time, but the wilful injury done by man, superadded, in some cases, to the shock of earthquake, which has ruined the great buildings of the past. The Pæstum temples took more injury during the years when the little town of Pesto clustered around their bases than during the three centuries which have elapsed since the inhabitants took fright at the increase of malaria in the district and moved their household goods to somewhat more salubrious locations. The little town had existed, even as Pompeii had existed, for at least twenty centuries; first as a Greek city, and, as such, called Poseidonia, or the town of the Sea God, then under Roman dominion as Pæstum, finally as a mediæval Italian town under the name of Pesto; and never seems to have risen to importance as a city, as a port, as a place of Commerce or of War;

THE ETCHINGS OF PIRANESI

being famous only for its exquisite roses which the luxurious people of the capital imported, as we of the American cities bring our roses to town in quantities and at fantastic prices all winter through. Pæstum had the advantage over our northern rose gardens in its climate and its situation, hardly ever visited by frost or even by cold northerly winds and rapid changes of temperature. On the other hand, as the Scotch and the Germans of northern Germany are more interested in flower gardening than other people—as it seems to be necessary to live in a more inclement climate in order to get up a real love for flowers—it may be that the Pæstum roses were not so fine as those which the cold, east-windy environments of Boston bring forward year by year. It is curious to think of this little town existing through the Roman time without serious changes made in the pure Greek architecture of the temples and the incomprehensible “Basilica,” and the following years of mediæval contest, misery, and ill-government all passing without more injury to these temples than to leave them roofless. That they should have been so little used for stone quarries is a proof how small and unenterprising was the town in which they had to stand so long.

As for the “Basilica,” called by Piranesi the



TEMPLE OF THE SIBYL AT TIVOLI

THE ETCHINGS OF PIRANESI

house of the Amphictyonic Council—a most whimsical appellative—it is always of interest to note the unexplained peculiarities of some ancient building of importance and belonging to an important epoch. Whereas all other temple-like structures—all other peristylar buildings of Greek antiquity—have four, six, eight, or some even number of columns on each of the two smaller faces, in this singular building alone are there nine on each of the narrower fronts. As an additional feature akin to the first, a row of columns divides its plan lengthwise, so that the middle column of the nine is an end column of that dividing row of pillars. Does this mean that the original building had two cellæ, or enclosed chambers? Is it not more likely that it contained no enclosed chambers at all, but was merely an open portico, with perhaps low screen walls or more movable and less massive screens between the pillars or between some of them? In this latter case the name “Basilica” is not so much a misnomer, for the basilicas were porticoes for the people in which to walk and to transact business, and the addition to them of chambers for court-rooms, tribunals, and the like was not essential, but as it were an afterthought. There seems no reason for not continuing to call it “Basilica” until further information shall have been

THE ETCHINGS OF PIRANESI
obtained. That information is not to be expected
until some millionaire furnishes the means for elabo-
rate examination of the whole site of Pæstum,
involving years of digging and months of study, and
the comparison of results.

ADDITIONAL NOTES ON PIRANESI

“All writers concur in describing G. B. Piranesi as one of the best designers and engravers of architectural subjects and ancient ruins, and the most picturesque in his arrangements and combinations, of the artists of his time. He had many imitators, but none arrived at that degree of skill which would entitle them to be called his rivals.

“His skill in congregating objects from different localities and arranging them for picturesque effect is admirable, and the force and vigor which he gave to the most important, by the scientific distribution of light and shade, obtained for him the designation of *The Rembrandt of Architecture.*”

(From Bryan's *Dictionary of Painters and Engravers*)

“Before leaving Italy we must go back 150 years to consider an artist who was ‘a law unto himself,’ in that his prints are totally different in manner and effect from all others. His countrymen, from Morghen to Toschi, loved to present the soft and sensuous beauty of the human face and form, but Piranesi devoted his life to etching the magnificent ruins and edifices of his native country. His plates are of large size, and are etched with so much picturesque boldness and ruggedness that he well deserves the sobriquet of *The Rembrandt of Architecture.*”

(From Harper's *Magazine*)

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